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978-0-521-29811-7 - The Problems of Theology  
Brian Hebblethwaite  
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# The problems of theology

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521231046](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521231046)

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First published 1980  
Reprinted 1987, 1989, 1992  
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2008

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-23104-6 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-29811-7 paperback

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## Preface

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One of the main problems to be discussed in this book is the relation between theology and religious studies. There is a tendency these days towards treating every aspect of religion, including the theologies of the different religions, under the single, all-embracing heading of 'religious studies'. This creates a fundamental problem for theologians in any particular religious tradition; for, as I argue in Chapter 1, the primary meaning of the term 'theology', controlling its looser and wider senses, is rational talk about God. The 'believing theologian', as I call him, is bound to resist the reduction of his activities to one among many interesting phenomena in the many-sided world of religion, to be studied as a more or less valuable historical curiosity. 'Theology', as I say, has a primary sense and a number of looser and wider senses. It can be used simply to refer to the different disciplines to be found within a traditional theological faculty. I argue that such disciplines must be related to theology in its primary meaning, if their presence in a single 'theological' faculty is to be defended. But I do not suggest that theology is for believers only. I discuss the question, in what sense it is possible for atheists to be theologians, and suggest a way of thinking of theology as consisting of serious, open questions, well worth studying for their own sake in the university, with all the critical and scholarly tools available there. Theology, then, is neither a closed, in-group activity for believers, nor just an intriguing aspect of the history of religions. Further problems explored in this book include the relations between theology and the comparative study of religions, be-

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### *Preface*

tween theology and the social sciences, between theology and philosophy, and between theology and history. I try to take seriously the alleged claims to revelation which the religions have made, and to answer the question whether, in the face of cultural and historical relativism, doctrinal theology can still be carried on today. In addition, there is a chapter on the problems of theology and ethics (both individual and social). In the nature of the case, the discussion of so many different problems in such a short book is brief and introductory. But, as well as introducing the reader to a rich and varied field of study, I aim to suggest a particular hypothesis about the proper nature and scope of theology today.